HUME'S RESPONSE TO THE PRESSURE TO CONFORM IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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When the subject of David Hume's religious views is raised, most people who are familiar with his writings think of a few books or essays which they treat as being largely isolated from the bulk of his philosophical productions. There are those who believe that Hume's views on religion are the necessary result of his epistemology and that religion, as such, had very little to do with his over all philosophical position. While this paper will not explore that particular contention, it is my view that this way of looking at Hume's philosophical writings, and the relationship between his religious views, and the remainder of his philosophy is a mistake—that in fact, if we are to understand Hume's writings in religion as well as his epistemology and those statements about metaphysics which he makes, they must be seen within the context of a religious setting and that it is, in fact, possible to read his entire philosophical structure as being motivated and influenced by the religious context in which he lived and wrote. This paper investigates one small aspect of that context—the eighteenth century pressure to conform in religious matters, (to some extent) the nature of that conformity, and Hume's over-all response to it. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the nature of his response, I hope to sketch, in a very broad way, how he attempted to handle the context in which he operated.

The eighteenth century considered conformity in religious matters an exceedingly important issue. It agreed with a view that has been prevalent since the time of the Greeks that a very basic relationship exists between what an individual believes and how he conducts himself, and between what a sizeable number of people in the society believe and the stability and welfare of that society as a whole. This view has rarely, if ever, been seriously challenged. What has been debated is the nature of that relationship and the degree of uniformity in belief which is required for social stability. Christianity has over the centuries tended to demand a high degree of uniformity. There are at least two very basic reasons for this demand—two reasons which are quite important in our understanding of Hume and his response to the pressures of his own day. First, and perhaps most basic, was the belief that Christian doctrines are true and that what deviates from them is, therefore, false. The second reason is that it was thought that morality and social stability depended on uniform religious beliefs. To say that Christian doctrine was true, was not to say that specific views were true because they were Christian doctrine, but rather

that they qualified to be a part of Christian doctrine because they were true. Disputes then, centered on whether a given view is true and therefore qualified to be part of the body of doctrine. By structuring the issues in this way, the entire question of how a truth claim can be supported and, furthermore what knowledge consists of became very important, since it seemed somehow unreasonable to maintain that one must accept what he could not know. This tended to raise two further issues. First, whether knowledge involved certainty, and second, how knowledge is to be obtained.

Traditionally, Christianity had maintained that the knowledge of the truth of religious matters came by means of revelation—that since revelation was an act of an omniscient God who could not lie, knowledge in religious matters was certain. This, in eighteenth century Protestant England, centered attention on the Bible. To question the truth of the Bible qualified one for the label of infidel or athiest. It was this emphasis upon how one comes to know the truth which was Locke's basis for distinguishing between religions. "For since all things that belong unto that religion are contained in that rule, it follows necessarily that those who agree in one rule are of one and the same religion, and vice-versa. Thus, Turks and Christians are of different religions because these take the holy scripture to be the rule of their religion and those the Alcoran."[1] Consequently, questions concerning the veracity of the Bible were raised, especially by the Deists, who rejected revelation. In this kind of scheme revelation requires some prior base—some ground for certainty, external, as it were, to itself—and then it itself is not the ultimate criterion of knowledge. Descartes believed he had found the ultimate criterion in the *Cogito* and in his "clear and distinct ideas," and Locke's position that revelation must meet the demands of reason tended to make reason the ultimate standard.

Most empiricists, after Locke, however, came to reject any definition of knowledge that involved mathematical certainty—at least in that sense in which they wanted to use the word "knowledge" to apply to matters concerning actual existences. This resulted in divisions in the realm of knowledge, like Hume's distinction between the result of demonstrative reasoning and that of moral reasoning.[2] By drawing this distinction, Hume had already attacked a very fundamental aspect of Christianity, since Christianity was based on the presupposition that revelation had occurred, Hume's approach was actually to assume exactly the opposite, namely that man's own intellectual ability became the criterion and not revelation as Christianity assumed. In other words, Hume's distinction, without coming to grips with the claims of Christianity or without refuting them, already denied them on a very basic level. On the other hand, the distinction that

Hume drew between demonstrative reasoning and moral reasoning seemed to strengthen the possibility for claims such as those made by the Deists that science and the information gained by science could be used in support of religious knowledge claims. If science could claim knowledge based on sense experience, causal relations, and argument by analogy, why could religious claims to knowledge not be based on these also? Consequently, we find arguments in support of revelation bolstered by scientific facts. The Deistic arguments for knowledge of God, immortality, etc., claimed to be based directly on sense experience. However, all of this depended ultimately for its force upon the assumption that the truth of such claims could be established.

The second reason for demanding a high degree of uniformity in religious beliefs was the view that heterodox views endangered social stability. We correctly view John Locke as liberal in this respect, but even he was not so liberal as to believe in liberty for those who deviated beyond a certain point from the generally accepted position. For example, he did not believe in toleration for either Catholics or Athiests. Yet, in spite of these two exceptions he did believe that society could accommodate a greater degree of dissent than most of his fellow Englishmen were willing to accept so long as there was general acceptance of Christian ethics.

Here was the rub, however. Could Christian ethics stand alone, or did it demand Christian doctrine for a base? Just what must be believed in order that Christian ethics could be maintained? After all, what was the relationship between personal belief and moral behavior? What was essential?

As we might expect, there was no complete agreement in England and Scotland about these issues, but it may come as a surprise to us to realize the nature of the disagreement. It was rare indeed to find anyone who questioned whether ethics rested upon Christian doctrines or not. What was disputed concerned what was to be considered essential doctrine. Certainly the most conservative Christian agreed with the Deists that belief in the existence of God, immortality, and eternal rewards and punishment was essential, and to that extent there was general uniformity of belief. The disagreements (and they were many and intense) concerned other, less basic, aspects of religious thought.

What was not called into question was the assumption that moral behavior was exclusively grounded in what one believed. Nor did anyone seriously question the position that to be moral one must accept certain specified general propositions. Rather when one finds disagreements they usually concerned specific issues within the bounds of these general propositions. For example, whether belief in the existence of God was vital as a foundation for morality was not questioned. What was questioned concerned the nature of God and the source of man's knowledge of

Him. Hume, however, questioned whether beliefs were the only basis for moral action and whether belief in God was at all basic.

This universally accepted assumption about the relationship between belief and social stability provided religion (and we must remind ourselves that in Scotland and England this meant Protestant Christianity) with a powerful tool. It suggested that people were somehow under obligation to accept the claims of Christianity because to reject them was to endanger social stability. It was not the right of the individual to make the decision to accept religious claims or to reject them. That decision involved more than one person, it affected the entire society and consequently society must make the decision as to what was accepted or rejected.

The action of Protestant groups in Europe during the reformation and immediately after–actions involving persecution of other Protestant groups and of Catholics–are often pictured as inconsistent with Protestant principles. However unfortunate these actions may have been, they seem to have been quite consistent with the universally accepted beliefs concerning the relation between personal beliefs and social stability. Locke's first *Letter Concerning Toleration* makes it clear that there were many who believed it was the duty of the government to enforce uniformity of belief. Locke makes it clear, also that this was more than just an attempt to force conformity in outward behavior. In fact, the weight of the major part of his argument for toleration rested on his claim that such an attempt to enforce belief is not only doomed to fail but is actually self-defeating. It seems reasonable to assume that had there been no attempt to enforce beliefs and no claim that such was possible, Locke would not have seen any value in showing its unreasonableness.

But we must be clear about one thing. What Locke is showing is not what Hume later was trying to do. Locke seems to accept the general principle that actions are to be explained primarily in terms of consciously held religious beliefs. He seems to assume that every one will agree, furthermore, that certain actions are right and pleasing to God and others are not.[3] The problem of intolerance is concerned rather with the externals of Christian ritual and with those beliefs which do not affect general moral behavior. It is for this reason that Catholics are not to have full liberty. Their beliefs make them give ultimate loyalty to a foreign power and therefore, their actions are suspect. Hume, on the other hand, was to suggest that what was universally accepted might not be true. His claim was to be that the relationship between belief and action may not be as simple as his contemporaries believed–that, in fact, other principles beside our consciously held beliefs may be important in explaining our actions.

If, as Locke seems to have believed, belief in the existence of God is somehow the fundamental ground for morality, then those who do not

believe in God must, of necessity, be wicked. Athiests, as we have already noted above, could not be trusted.

This view concerning the relationship of belief in the existence and nature of a deity and its connection with moral behavior and the moral character of the individual seems to have been at the heart of a major problem for Boswell. Ernest Campbell Mossner's description of Boswell's confusion is worth quoting in this context:

> Though in consequence, Hume's infidelity violently repelled Boswell, it also strongly attracted him. He was seized with a strong curiosity to discover the key to Hume's ethical existence: Why did not skepticism of religion, the reputed foundation of morality, make of him an immoral man? And immoral Hume was not. On the contrary, he was the very soul of virtue . . . .
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> Boswell was frankly puzzled. Moral imperatives may be imperative, yet–he was compelled to admit–they do not always carry conviction. That virtue and infidelity are irreconcilable, he did not seriously doubt; but the consequences were not entirely clear: If Hume was not a Christian, he must secretly be wicked? Or, if Hume was good, he must secretly be a Christian? Which alternative offered the more suitable explanation? One or the other, he felt, must be true. But which?[4]

Boswell's final solution to this problem was to assume that Hume was actually a secret Christian. In view of what Hume actually did believe this solution to the problem is ludicrous. It was, it seems, a radical departure for Hume to suggest that religion is not the single thing from which all moral behavior flows. In fact, he would argue that in some cases rather than being the source of moral action it was the source of evil.

Eighteenth century society, then, demanded acceptance of the claims of Christianity on two counts: first, because they were true and could be shown to be so; and second, because as members of the social order, morality was necessary and this rested on the acceptance of religious claims. It is this two-part claim, generally accepted without question, which determined for Hume what the nature of his defense against the pressures to conform in religion must be.

Hume's writings on religion are much too sophisticated and complex to be adequately categorized according to topic. However, I would like to outline briefly the general scheme which Hume seems to have followed in developing the defense we have been speaking of.

In response to the claim that Christianity is true, could be known to be so, and was therefore to be believed, Hume set out to show that if it were true it could not be shown to be so by any method for gaining knowledge accepted by eighteenth century intellectuals. The claim that revelation does or has occurred was challenged as being unsupportable. The only serious evidence Hume, and for that matter most of his contemporaries, recognized in support of this claim was that drawn from accounts of

miracles. Such accounts related both to the belief in the truth of the Bible and to view that God often still spoke directly to people. This second position was known as "Enthusiasm." The claim to direct revelation, or "Enthusiasm," is referred to by Hume in various places, but treated most directly in a short essay, entitled "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," originally written in 1739-40.

It is interesting to note that Hume does not deal with this subject in a serious manner. At no time does he treat the claim to direct revelation with the kind of seriousness that those who supported the view would have expected. He discusses its causes and gives certain psychological reasons for the belief which by their very nature deny the validity of the claims themselves. It is apparent from what Hume says that he does not accept the soundness of claims to direct revelation from God and, in fact, treats such claims as being so impossible that they are not even afforded the common courtesy of being soundly analyzed and criticized.

On the other hand, Hume treats the topic of miracles with a great deal of seriousness. The subject becomes a very crucial aspect of his total defense and becomes the heart of his rejection of the Christian religion and especially of the basic doctrine of Christianity as he sees it--the doctrine of the resurrection. This he discusses in Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1747. The section on miracles had apparently been originally written much earlier, some time between 1735 and 1737. It is my opinion that Hume failed to make his case concerning miracles and that this failure is partly due to the fact that his successful attack on Deism committed him to a position which he was forced to contradict if he wished to successfully attack miracles. However, I think Hume did not realize his own failure and certainly much of the intellectual world since the time of Hume has also failed to recognize it, if, in fact, he does fail.

If revelation would not do as an adequate evidence for the truth of Christian doctrine, might not the major ones, those dealing with the existence and nature of God, be supported by appeals to human reason? The Deists and some Christians claimed that the being and nature of God is obvious to anyone who cares to examine the evidence. The evidence spoken of here was scientific evidence which was said to be obvious to anyone who cared to study nature. Hume's principle answer to this defense of religious claims is to be found in two places: first, in Section XI of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and, more completely, in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

One further possible basis for demanding conformity still remained however--the belief that religion was the foundation, and the only adequate foundation for morality. As long as this position remained

unchallenged, pressure to conform in religious matters could be supported in two ways. First, it could be argued that even if religious claims could not be shown to be either true or false in their own right, the good result of believing them (namely a moral life) and the evil result of rejecting them (that is, an immoral life) were proof of their truth.

Finally, it might also be argued that one must conform--at least outwardly, in what he said, wrote, etc.,--for the good of society, regardless of the truth of the doctrines involved.

Hume developed his defense against these claims in two ways. First, by challenging the claim that religious belief resulted in a moral life. He argued rather that it often did just the opposite. This aspect was developed most thoroughly in *The Natural History of Religion*. Second, he set out to show that morality was the result of a "moral sense," natural to all men, and not the result of reason operating on certain cognative religious principles. This theme is developed in books II and III of *A Treatise of Human Nature and in An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.*

The boldness of this overall defense against the constant pressure of the eighteenth century world and the genius with which that defense was carried out, alone make Hume's writings on religion worthy of greater attention thatn they have received.

NOTES

[1] John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *Works* (3rd ed. corrected; London: John Pemberton . . . , 1727), II, p. 250.

[2] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (2nd Ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 35.

[3] Locke, II, p. 250.

[4] Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Forgotten Hume* (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1967), p. 170.

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